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Topic: Interpreting and Artificial Intelligence

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Title: The Human Value Proposition: Social Workers' Perspectives on Interpreter-Mediated Interaction

Abstract

This presentation examines the role(s) of human interpreters in interpreter-mediated social work as experienced and described by social workers. The interpreter's role has been a subject of sustained scholarly interest. Scholars have examined interpreters' complex role in various communicative situations from the perspectives of both service users and interpreters themselves (e.g., Anderson 1976/2002; Roy 1993/2002; Angelelli 2004; Leanza 2005; Hsieh & Kramer 2012; Llewellyn-Jones & Lee 2013; Krystallidou 2016). Professional codes of ethics define the interpreter's role. However, depending on the communicative situation and its participants, the interpreter's role is (re)negotiated and enacted differently in practice.

The growing use of on-demand interpreting applications and the platform economy (Srebrowska et al. 2026; Viljanmaa 2026) appears to be shifting interpreting practices away from onsite human interaction towards disembodied interpreter voices. AI-based interpreting, currently being piloted in several Finnish wellbeing services counties, represents the ultimate form of faceless, non-human interpreting. The task of interpreting is thus reduced to the traditional notion of a mechanical *conduit*. In contrast to this trend towards facelessness and dehumanization, this presentation revisits the question of what human interpreters contribute to client encounters in PSI. The data consist of thematic interviews conducted in 2023 with thirteen social workers in Finland. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the participants recounted their experiences of working with interpreters, describing both challenges and successful forms of interprofessional collaboration. For the analysis, passages referring to the interpreter's role and tasks were identified and extracted from the data. The resulting descriptions were analyzed qualitatively, and the findings were compared with conceptualizations and metaphors identified in previous research on the interpreter's role.

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